



Career Spotlight on Home Health Services

by Robert C. Marvin and Annette Miller

In last month's article, economist Barbara Wagner examined Montana's aging workforce, and the challenges it presents to many industries that will need to replace workers who plan to retire in the near future. The health care industry in particular may face a shortage of workers, because the demand for health care increases as a population ages. In this article, we will highlight occupations in a specific area of health care that will likely see some of the largest employment growth in the coming years: home health services.

The Demand for Home Health Care

Employment in home health services is projected to grow dramatically in the near future. Job projections for the 2008 to 2018 timeframe show employment levels for Home Health Aides increasing by 23.9% or (from 3,267 to 4,048 jobs), or 2.2 % annually. Employment for Personal and Home Care Aides is expected to increase by 21.8% (from 2,651 to 3,228 jobs), or 2.0% annually.¹ This growth rate is well above average for all Montana occupations.

There are several reasons for such rapid growth, and Montana's aging workforce is a major one. By 2023, Montanans aged 65 and older are expected make up nearly a quarter (24.5%) of the state's total population. In comparison, this age group currently comprises only 14.8% of the population.²

Beyond the sheer force of a major demographic shift, there has also been a cultural shift toward home health care. More and more, people with health problems



choose to take their assistance outside of hospitals and institutions. Not only the elderly, but also people with long-term disabilities and those recovering from injuries, feel more comfortable in their own homes. Some even say that being at home can help patients recover more quickly from injuries and illnesses.

Cost is another factor driving the shift toward home health care. According to Genworth Financial's 2009 Cost of Care Survey, the yearly cost of a private room in a nursing home in Montana is \$63,145. By contrast, the price for the services of a licensed Home Health Aide comes to \$43,472 a year.³ Keep in mind that this estimate assumes 44 hours of service per week, and some home health services clients may not need that much time with caregivers.⁴ Because of its reputation as an effective, less expensive alternative to hospital care, insurance companies are increasingly willing to cover home health care.⁵

Home Health Services Occupations

Some confusion may occur when classifying home health services occupations, because different agencies often use different job titles to describe their employ-



ees. For the purposes of this article we will examine the two occupations defined by the Standard Occupational Classification (SOC) system: Personal and Home Care Aides, and Home Health Aides. The job descriptions are similar for both occupations, with a few important differences, which are outlined below.

Duties

Personal and Home Care Aides perform the everyday tasks that their clients are unable to do on their own. Often, they provide housekeeping services such as laundry and cleaning, and may plan meals, cook, and buy groceries for their clients. They also help clients move around the house, bathe, get dressed, and groom themselves. They might also accompany clients outside the home by taking them shopping or helping them get to doctor's appointments.

Additionally, Personal and Home Care Aides may serve as companions to their clients, entertaining them by reading, playing games, or just having a conversation. They keep a regular record of their clients' condition and report any changes to their supervisor, who is generally a Registered Nurse (RN), physical therapist, or social worker.

Home Health Aides perform all or some of the duties listed above, plus some additional basic health services, such as checking their client's pulse and respiration rates, and taking their temperature. They may also perform massage services, apply ointments and heating pads, or teach their clients to perform simple exercises, or to use braces or artificial limbs. Advanced aides with specialized training may also assist their clients in using medical equipment, such as ventilators. Home Health Aides work under the direct supervision of a medical professional, usually a nurse.

Both types of aides must be in good physical condition to perform the work. In many cases, aides must support patients while helping them in and out of bed. They may also come into contact with hazards such as minor infections and communicable diseases, which is why they must always follow the proscribed safety procedures. Occasionally, the clients themselves may be irritable, depressed, angry, or even abusive. Aides must be mentally and emotionally prepared to deal with difficult people and a stressful work environment.

Training

Personal and Home Care Aides are required to have a Personal Care Assistant (PCA) certificate, or proof of at least one year's experience as an agency-based caregiver. To earn a PCA certificate, applicants must complete a sixteen hour training course and pass a final exam. Additional training is provided on the job, usually by an RN, a Licensed Practical Nurse (LPN), or an experienced aide. No specific educational level is required, but to be competitive with other applicants, it is recommended that prospective employees obtain a high school diploma or GED. Prior experience providing care can give an applicant a competitive advantage.

Home Health Aides must complete a state-approved Certified Nursing Aide (CNA) training program, which consists of a 75-hour training course, followed by a written and manual skills exam. Topics covered in the course include recording vital signs, hygiene, infection control, safe transfer techniques, and basic nutrition.⁶ As with PCA's, no specific educational level is required, but a high school diploma is recommended.

Home Health Aides who are willing to undergo further education and training have many advancement



opportunities. Fifteen apprenticeable specialties are associated with the occupation, including disability, hospice, dementia, mental illness, and geriatric specialists. Becoming a certified Home Health Aide can also serve as the basis for a career in nursing. Many Home Health Aides continue their education to become LPNs or RNs.

Wages

Home Health Care Providers in Montana earn slightly more than the national average in their respective occupations. Personal and Home Care Aides earn a median wage of \$9.43 per hour (\$9.22 nationally), while Home Health Aides earn \$9.93 (\$9.84 nationally).⁷ Wages vary by employer, and by the employee's level of experience and responsibility. Because Home Health Care Providers are generally employed as "on-call" hourly workers, employers typically do not provide benefits, such as health insurance.

Outlook

As previously stated, home health services occupations are expected to be some of the fastest growing occupations in the state. Job projections for 2008-2018 predict that there will be approximately 102 job openings per year for Personal and Home Care Aides in Montana, and an additional 107 openings per year

for Home Health Aides. The majority of these openings will be due to growth in the industry, rather than turnover.

Two Perspectives on Home Health Services

Stating the facts and figures of home health services occupations can provide a certain amount of insight, but to get the full story, you have to talk to the people in the industry. We spoke to two home health service professionals from Helena, Montana to help complete the picture.

Lucas is a Program Manager with an in-home health care agency, and has been involved with home health services since he was seventeen. He was certified by the State of California Child Protective Services under instruction by RNs. While his current duties include scheduling and other administrative tasks, he still spends time in the field, directly providing care for clients.

Lucas states that the most important quality for home health service providers to possess is reliability, as evidenced by a good work history. He says, "You can educate and give anyone a diploma. It does not mean that they make good workers."

Lucas explains that being a good worker means, "Showing up to the job and being on time. [...] Non-smoker is a big plus. Appearance clean and neat. High school grad is helpful. Any experience in home health care is a step up as well. Background checks are mandatory." In his agency, CNA certification is very important. "We look for that almost first thing," Lucas says. Employees must also have their own vehicles and insurance.

Lucas views his current job as a preferred career, rather than a stepping stone to something else. The most satisfying aspect of his work is, "being able to help



somebody and still being able to make a living.” He also likes the stability of the job, adding, “There’s no shortage of work, if you want it.”

Char has been a Personal Care Assistant for the past five months, but her original career aspiration was to be involved in criminal justice. She accepted a job as a PCA as “a short-term job for the time being,” but soon grew to love her work and eventually changed her focus. She now views her job as a first step toward becoming a nurse.

“I like that my job is flexible,” she says. “I don’t have to clock in and out, stay in one place all the time, do the same thing every day. I get to meet new people and get to know them and form a relationship/bond with them. I also like that I’m helping people, making their day better, or just listening to them.” Her one complaint? “I don’t like that there is so much turnover in terms of staff and management.”

Lucas concurs that turnover is a problem for his industry. “There seems to be difficulty finding and retaining qualified, reliable, and compassionate home care workers,” he says. “Hiring difficulties include inability to pass background checks, requisite certification, education, or experience required by the state of Montana.”

For those interested in a home health services career, certain skills are required. According to Char, PCA’s must be able to fill out paperwork correctly, have legible handwriting, have good social skills, know basic cooking and cleaning, and possess critical thinking skills. Lucas adds that listening and paying attention to clients is essential, as is triage, or being able to prioritize clients’ needs, assessing problems, and solving them. His advice to prospective aides: “Be prepared for a fast-paced, high-drama, stressful environment,” and “take a CNA class.”

Char warns that, “If you are not a people person or friendly, get irritated easily, show all your emotions, speak whatever is on your mind, [...] not motivated, lazy, not punctual--then this is not the job for you.”

However, home health services jobs may be the perfect fit for those who are highly social and enjoy helping people. Whether you are changing careers or planning what to do after high school, if you are the type of person who considers interpersonal relationships important, enjoys hands-on work, wants a flexible schedule, doesn’t like doing the same thing every day, and wants to work in a friendly and non-competitive environment; then you just might have a bright future in home health services.

Sources:

¹ Research and Analysis Bureau - Montana Job Projections 2008-2018

² U.S. Census Bureau

³ www.genworth.com

⁴ According to home health services professional Lucas Beavers, 25 to 30 hours per week with caregivers is typical.

⁵ Montana Career Information System - <http://mtcis.intocareers.org>

⁶ “Licensed Occupations in Montana.” Montana Career Information System, http://mcis.dli.mt.gov/licensed_occupations.asp

⁷ 2008 Occupational Employment Statistics, Bureau of Labor Statistics. www.bls.gov

